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Current Art Topics

By "MAHLSTICK," London Correspondent

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THE Autumn Season this year in things artistic, is signalized by two exhibitions of interest, though making very different appeals: they are the British Arts and Crafts at the Royal Academy, and Mr. Nevinson's War pictures at the Leicester Galleries. This latter has attained a not incon-



THE INN YARD
By A. J. Munnings

siderable measure of success, catching the public taste for novelty, by its quite interesting adaptation of the Cubist formula to the grim rhythm of war. But it is with the work at the Royal Academy that I propose to concern myself primarily. It is almost significant sign of the changing world which is unfolding itself before us that the Academy should permit its rooms to be occupied by any exhibition but its own; it is tantamount to the House of Lords inviting the Labor Party to hold its meeting in its own august gilded Chamber. And it was not without some jar to old memories and associations that one ascended the familiar stairway to be confronted in the entrance hall with a huge panorama of a transfigured Trafalgar Square, which, truth to tell, recalled the White City or Earls Court,

rather than the erstwhile dignified severity of the entrance gallery. As we walked through an unfamiliar series of rooms designated "Hall of Heroes" or "Hall Ecclesiastic" Municipal, or Textile, or others dubbed "Domus III," etc., the incongruity with the traditional atmosphere of Burlington House was unpleasantly apparent. Our purpose, however, is not with retrospective regrets, but to make a serious if rapid survey of a very remarkable and significant exhibition. Its purpose is a two-fold one. In the first place, the movement of which it is an expression, endeavors to restore to the civilization of our day the crafts, as constituents therein, without which it will be swallowed up in an industrialism which threatens to devour the manhood and soul of the individual worker, who is now not a craftsman or workman but significant and expressively "a hand." The allotment of a man's labor just to one or other fraction of the whole process of manufacture, the result of the minute sub-division and specialization in all machine-made products, leaves the greater part of the worker's capacity unemployed and likely therefore to run to seed in directions good neither for the individual or the community. Those of my readers who have had the opportunity to compare the village crafts-



IN THE WEST COUNTRY
By A. J. Munnings

man—the carpenter, the blacksmith, the wheelwright, the weaver and the mason, etc., with the average factory hand as seen in our great aggregations of workers at the various industrial centers, will not require me to elaborate my argument, that in one case the worker can live the life of a man, can hardly help doing so, in the other only an exceptional nature can avoid becoming an automaton through the soul-deadening monotony and limited scope of his daily toil. The peasant actors of the Ober-Ammergau Passion Play, are typical in one instance, the raucous crowd at a football match, or a coursing meeting in the English Midlands are typical of the other. Yet this exhibition proves that our English countryside and urban districts abound in latent craftsmanship and artistic possibilities, equal to producing all the varied catalogue of objects of daily use and necessity, which constituted the furniture, appointments and utensils of every home, in the days when everything came from the workshop and the hands of the local master craftsman, his apprentice and his workmen, ever afterwards to be identified as their work; so that as they went among their neighbors—their homes and homesteads—they could and doubtless did often point with honest pride to this, that or the other evidence of their skill, industry and taste as carpenter, mason, weaver or potter. These were the days, it is hardly beyond the mark, to say that anyone gifted with the matured judgment and taste of our own times, might have traveled the length and breadth of England from castle to cottage without finding in the furniture, the ironwork, the pottery and the textiles as much to offend, as he would have done in any one of the great emporiums or stores of the Mid-Victorian period. It is strange to realize that practically everything then made, not merely those for beauty or decoration, but those for common daily use, are now eagerly sought after by collectors. They rarely, if ever, sin against the principle of good construction; an instinctive sense of proportion governs their lines and balance of parts, but above all their beauty and decorative effect were due mainly to their nice proportion and balance, and in a very minor de-



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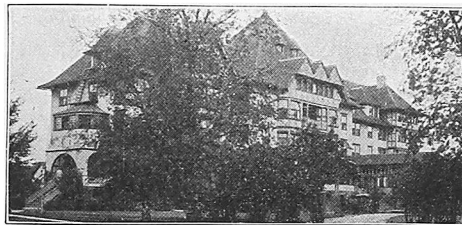
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gree to any ornament. It is a great mistake, however, and a common one, to deduce from these facts, that the craftsmen of those ages were guided or inspired by the same conscious, cultured and educated taste, so much in evidence in this exhibition, or that en masse they were more highly endowed by nature than the workman of our own time. The real causes underlying the deterioration which is universally acknowledged to mark modern production, is its Commercialism, a phrase covering the introduction of machinery and the factory, whilst science and its discoveries minister in a thousand ways to the potentialities of the machine, eliminating more and more from his own productions, the mind and soul of man. The how and the why of this is too large a problem to enter into now; but I may just indicate one or two lines of thought. Aesthetically and artistically man is of a dual Jekyll and Hyde composition, with a strong bias towards the baser side of himself. His native proneness to vulgar excess in every domain of decoration had little chance to exercise itself till machinery and science came to its aid, consequently his higher artistic instincts were allowed full play; any attempt to go to excess in carving, inlaying, coloring and other forms of ornamentation were limited by their tax on his time, energy and materials. But a machine will do as much wood-cutting and carving in a day as a workman can do in a month. The French Polisher will shine up a table top more garishly and brilliantly in a few hours than the beautiful old oil and elbow-grease method could hope to attain in a year. With only the coloring dyes at his command to be extracted from plants and earths and metals of his own neighborhood, the dyer might sigh in vain for the vulgar shrillness of the coal-tar products. Under the old conditions and limitations the workman and craftsman could safely be left to his own devices, but in our own day he has to be educated to keep to that narrow path of reticence, restraint and sobriety, which leads to true beauty. This education of our arts, crafts and industries is one of the principal aims of the promoters of this exhibition. The pioneer of this great reforming movement was John

Ruskin, laughed at and ridiculed in his own day as a tilter at windmills, but whose teaching like the grain of mustard, has grown into a mighty tree whose beneficent shade is gradually creeping across large areas of our industrial world. In this exhibition one very interesting display is that of various articles of domestic use, purchased indiscriminately from any shops that dealt in them, and are here shown as evidence of how the machine and the factory can, if directed with right intent and knowledge, turn out work freed in great measure, from the qualities that for almost a century have led to the degradation aesthetically, of our homes, their contents and appointments, so much that Gladstone in a famous speech towards the end of his career declared that he doubted if anything produced after Waterloo would ever be desired or acquired by connoisseurs and collectors; he of course did not mean to include painting, engraving and sculpture. But in this section of goods obtained from the shops, there were numerous instances of right intention, and of high attainment. As in the past so in the future the finest work will always be that of the individual craftsman working singly or in co-operation with a select company of workers with similar aims; like the famous pioneer firm of Morris, Marshall & Co. founded by the Pre-Raphaelites and working in conjunction with them; but the machine and the factory have come to stay and will be with us ever more and more.

Ruskin's followers fully recognize that if the outward semblance of our civilization is to be brought back to the beauty of Chester, of Nuremburg, of Bruges, or of Venice, the architectural perfection of whose buildings was but the prelude to the treasures in furniture, metal work, tapestries and pottery which constituted their everyday matter of course appointments, it can only be through raising to its highest possible level, the output of the factory, which must henceforth for ever remain the main source from which we must obtain the appurtenances of life.

The more perfect work of the individual craftsman can henceforth only be the privilege of the favored few; this is at once evi-



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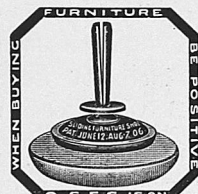
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dent by comparing the prices or cost of the cabinet work, for instance, in this exhibition, with the corresponding trade specimens, in any shop or store; they are quite worth the great difference in price as works of art and examples of the finest possible workmanship, but in these days of cheaply produced goods they are nothing less than luxuries like pictures or bronzes. The aesthetic renovation of the world's wares can never be effected by such efforts except as setting the standard to caterers for the million.

There are many features in the exhibition which I hope to refer to later in more detail, for its scope is wide, from new patterns in toasting forks by J. W. Buckman, to a huge scenic design for the transformation of Trafalgar Square.

By one of those inexplicable whims of the public taste, such as that on which Mr. Augustus John—his tongue in his cheek—floated into notoriety and prosperity, Mr. Nevinson's Cubist War pictures have achieved quite a financial success at the Leicester Galleries. He has been to the front in the fighting line, and has since recorded his impressions and experiences, in a series of works based on the cubist formula very much modified. It cannot be denied that this does lend itself in its angularity and stiffness to the grimness of war, and by its rhythmic repetition of cubic forms in strong receding perspective along lines of landscape and under skies all in violent perspective, the sense of movement, and the tramp of men marching is conveyed to the spectator with undoubted power and conviction. But it is equally undeniable that the method is absolutely mechanical, a similar result is to be attained by anyone armed with a properly selected and graduated assortment of wax or plasticine cubes. The work bears about as much relation to painting, as the wool-work samplers of our great grandmothers; but as an interesting and amusing experiment it is legitimate. To be taken as art it has no claims. Yet incredible as it appears critics and admirers have not been lacking to hail such tricks as a new revelation, and many of the latter have not hesitated to back their fancy with their dollars. My first

acquaintance with Nevinson's work was at my frame-makers, who showed me what he considered a freak in paint; it represented the gyrations of a ballet-girl, and, to indicate the whirling movements, the artist had endowed the figure with some five or six spokes or legs. These were not painted, but pieces of pink silk had been cut to the shape, more or less, of a leg and pasted on to the canvas and decorated with bits of laces. Other such diversions and brilliant inspirations occurred about the canvas, as the designer's whim had moved him; he called it art—shades of Titian and Michael Angelo!!!

It will be always the distinction of Mr. A. J. Munnings whose work I referred to last month, that he has succeeded where modern art has hitherto conspicuously failed; i. e., in painting pictures of hunting subjects which are art. Generations of painters have tried to raise this very large important and most popular section of English genre to some sort of aesthetic merit, but though their work is often quaint, naive and interesting, the red coats, the satin-skinned horses and the clean-cut trim forms of the hounds have defied all their efforts to fuse the ensemble into an artistic unity. The red coat of the hunting field like the scarlet uniform of the English soldier, had hitherto proved utterly unamenable to any sort of aesthetic tones or values. Indeed the painters who devoted themselves to such subjects, were like the fashionable drawing masters of the last century only admitted on sufferance to the ranks of the artists. But to Mr. Munnings the secret has been revealed and he shows us canvas after canvas, depicting scenes from the hunting field, which for refinement and beauty of color, and dignity of composition and sentiment are hardly to be surpassed in any section of modern painting. In the illustration here given my readers can see for themselves how remote the vision is from all previous attempts in this direction. The picture is quite in the "grand style," yet it is almost brutally uncompromising in its realism and fidelity to nature. I see from some references in the press that his work is about to be introduced to the American Art Public.